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Employers help workers cope

A morning walk during work hours gives April Cantu a little exercise and time to decompress after an hourlong commute to her San Ramon job.

Every morning when she gets into work, the Mountain House resident walks a mile along the trail at the Bishop Ranch Business Park.

As the manager of Irwin Home Equity Corp., she encourages her employees to walk with her, she said.

"If people are staying healthy, then they don't get a lot of employees calling in sick," Cantu said.

To help promote better health among their workers, employers are offering everything from wellness programs and stress-management classes to on-site massages, gym memberships and yoga classes -- for free.

Many of the San Joaquin County commuters who spend hours on the road have no time for regular exercise. They get stressed and sleep deprived and sometimes don't eat right. Research suggests commuter stress can lead to illnesses. Employers are absorbing that cost with high absentee rates and turnover, researchers say.

At Lockheed Martin, employees can exercise on site, participate in wellness classes or play intramural sports sponsored by the company, Dietz said.

"We believe in work-life balance, and healthy employees are productive," said Susan Dietz, commute service manager for Lockheed Martin in Sunnyvale. "It's quality of life for our employees."

With employees traveling farther to get to work, some companies offer incentives for commute alternatives, such as vouchers for public transit and carpools, said Robin Snyder, national program manager for Best Workplaces for Commuters, a federal program aimed to encourage employers to provide commute alternatives.

"It's those employee incentives that need to be in place to tempt someone away from their car," Snyder said.

Providing these alternatives doesn't just cut back on traffic congestion, it can help turn a long commute into a healthy commute, health experts say.

"If someone takes a train and then has a long walk or bike to get to and from their commute, then the fact that it is a long commute isn't so important, because they are able to build physical activity into it," said Andrew Dannenberg, medical officer with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health.

Terry Brugger of Tracy rides the Altamont Commuter Express train part of the way to work.

When he gets off at his Vasco stop, Brugger bikes to Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where he works as a computer scientist.

Through his job, he gets a \$105 tax-free voucher to ride the train from Tracy to Vasco. On top of that, the lab provides bike storage on site to make it convenient for him to ride his bike.

"I'm in better shape," Brugger said.

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